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ABSTRACT

Public relations as strategic communication is one possible theme for an introductory course in public relations. This perspective focuses attention on messages (their content, timing, media, and so forth) as strategic responses to the audience and the situation. It provides a defensible rationale for including certain relevant topics in the course and omitting others. Finally, the principle helps to define the relationship between the introductory public relations course and other courses, both within the speech communication curriculum and outside the discipline. Topics that might be covered with an emphasis on corporate advocacy include audience identification, public relations tasks, media availability, strategic options, and sound argumentation. Another public relations function that should be included in such a course is issues management--the process by which the corporation can identify, evaluate, and respond to those social and practical issues which may have a significant impact upon it. By including the skills essential for advocacy and issues management, students will be better prepared for major decision making roles within organizations. (HOD)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS AS STRATEGY

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PUBLIC RELATIONS AS STRATEGY

Public Relations has come to mean, in Humpty Dumpty's words, whatever we choose it to mean. A cursory review of basic public relations texts suggests a plethora of topics considered appropriate for the introductory course.[1] Yet, time constraints in the typical undergraduate course do not allow even minimal attention to all these topics. This paper argues, therefore, the need for a controlling principle or theme for the introductory course and suggests that that principle be: public relations as strategic communication. That perspective focuses attention on messages (their content, timing, media, etc.) as strategic <u>responses</u> to audience(s) and the situation. It provides a defensible rationale for including certain relevant topics in the course and omitting others. Finally, the principle helps to define the relationship between the introductory public relations course and other courses, both within the speech communication curriculum and outside the discipline. To illustrate the perspective, the paper examines corporate advocacy and issues management as two examples of strategic communications with which public relations professionals are increasingly called upon to deal.

<u>Corporate Advocacy</u>

Though the public relations role always involves trying to create a positive image of the organization, increasingly public relations also necessitates that practitioners serve as advocates for the positions and policies of their organizations.[2]

Though I used the term corporate advocacy here, many not-for-profit organizations also need and employ the skills of the advocate. That task is not necessarily overwhelming, of course, if those practices are popular or are perceived in the public good. When the individual or "public" good is threatened, however, the public relations task becomes more difficult. Central to an effective communication effort in such cases is a perceived consistency between the organization's action (policy, product, etc.) and its message.

Many organizations, both private and public sector, engage in advocacy at two levels. First, they develop proactive campaigns that anticipate potential negative issues and attempt to resolve or minimize the impact of those issues before they gain widespread public visibility. The second approach, which operates in tandem with the first, is to develop a plan to handle potential crises situations. One large public utility, for example, has an on-going public relations campaign that focuses on rising utility rates, service issues, and social responsibility concerns. That same utility has comprehensive communication plans for responding to nuclear spills, chemical spraying damage, and transmission failures. As additional information becomes available, those plans are updated and revised. Both the proactive and reactive approaches are strategic in the sense that the plans or strategem they devise are initiated and implemented toward a clear organizational goal.

What topics should a basic public relations course include that would prepare students for corporate advocacy? The following list is a tentative beginning.

1. Audience Identification. Most public relations texts currently include attention to internal and external audiences and to target audiences. Additionally, courses in rhetorical theory can be extremely helpful in developing in students a sense of the importance of "audience." The rhetorical perspective can also provide students a means of analyzing the multiple audiences to which the corporate or organizational message must be addressed. Though the opinion survey may be useful for analyzing the general or public audience, it will likely not be possible to conduct statistical analyses of all the audiences the public relations professional must address. The rhetorical analytical methodology provides a useful construct for the public relations professional in such situations. In any case, it can give the professional relevant questions to ask about a given audience and a means of explaining the answers to those questions.

   The basic public relations course should emphasize the media as audience since the media presentation of an advocacy message is critical in determining the effectiveness of that message.[3] Of particular relevance is the important role media play in determining programming,

in developing point of view, other and in exercising editorial judgments. Specific issues involved in business-media relations should be introduced in the basic public relations course. An advanced course in the curriculum should examine in detail business-media-legal relationships. A case study approach is particularly useful in studying the issues involved, particularly the adversarial nature of the relationship.

2. Public Relations Tasks. As related to advocacy, at least, the public relations task involves more than image making. In some instances, of course, the practitioner is charged with creating a positive image or repairing a damaged one. In such cases, the task may accomplished through initiating favorable news stories, providing factual material to the media, or clarifying distortions; on the other hand, the task may be to counter or disprove charges or to defend the organization's position or policies.[4] The public relations professional may even find it necessary to attempt to influence those corporate practices that will likely adversely affect the organization's public image.

3. Media Availability. Not only is it important to determine which communication channels are available for public relations messages; it is also critical to recognize how those channels are limited for advocacy messages,

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particularly by the Fairness Doctrine.[5] Further, students need to distinguish between media useful for internal messages (newsletters, bulletin boards, brochures and flyers, and telephone hotlines) and those that are appropriate for external messages (annual reports, speakers bureaus, letters, press releases, press conferences, educational materials, and advertising). Both internal and external media can be useful for advocacy. Courses including Introduction to the Mass Media, Writing for the Media (or Public Relations) and Business or Management Communication are useful for providing depth in both theory and practice and for offering a variety of perspectives of the choices to be made and the skills to be employed in fulfilling the public relations task.

4. Strategic Options. If public relations is to be treated as strategic communication, practitioners must know the options available to them. These options will differ, of course, depending on whether the practitioner is involved in traditional public relations activities dealing with the organization's image or in advocacy of the organization's positions or policies. Traditional public relations options include providing facts about the industry or product, filling a consumer need, and/or identifying with something the public considers positive.[6] Advocacy strategies range from withdrawal to confrontation to redefinition of issues to presenting the organization's

position without responding to attacks made on it.[7] Students should be encouraged to identify the relative advantages and disadvantages of each strategy in light of the public relations task as it relates to the audience operating within a specific situation.

A course in practical or applied argumentation would seem particularly useful in exploring advocacy strategies. Through traditional courses in argumentation and debate would likely be less applicable directly to the public relations situation, those courses would ground students in rudimentary principles of strategic communication. Students should also find Business Policy/Strategy courses helpful. Since those courses usually have substantive business prerequisites, however, they will likely be open only to business majors or minors.

5. Sound Argumentation. Most contemporary public relations texts that consider writing for public relations focus on descriptive or narrative copy.[8] Advocacy, on the other hand, necessitates argumentative writing that will gain a fair hearing for the message from the various audiences to which it is addressed. The aim of argumentative writing is to convince and/or, perhaps, to persuade. Argumentative writing demands from the public relations practitioner a clear sense of logos (both evidence and reasoning); it also necessitates an understanding

of the audience(s) since, in applied communication settings at least, an argument is useful only if it convinces those to whom it is addressed.

Some English departments currently offer courses in argumentative writing. Those should be useful to the public relations student. Further, basic courses in speech communication and applied logic would be relevant, as would a course in practical argumentation. Again, the traditional argumentation and debate course would likely be of less direct applicability than would a case-oriented approach.

Issues Management

A second relatively new function that comes under the aegis of public relations in many organizations is issues management, which has been defined as "the process by which the corporation can identify, evaluate, and respond to those social and practical issues which may impact significantly upon it."[9] The issues management function developed in response to unfriendly external environmental forces--particularly negative attitudes toward business that no doubt reflected, if they did not result in, increasingly restrictive legislation and regulation. In some organizations, issues management is treated as a public affairs function; in others it is more closely allied with public relations. In a number of organizations, public relations has been subsumed under the public affairs division.

The increased attention to public affairs--whether within the public relations department or external to it--has spawned a renewed interest in strategy as it relates to dealing with the external environment. For some time, strategic planning has dominated the internal organizational planning function. In a few organizations, issues management has brought together planning as it relates to both internal and external organizational concerns.[10]

Through issues management practitioners do not agree on the function of their "trade," they generally do agree on its process, which is--essentially--a communication plan. The Chase-Jones issues management model and its many adaptations include: issue identification, analysis, action plans, implementation, and evaluation of results.[11] Issue identification includes a number of sophisticated methods for environmental scanning as well as more random means of determining relevant trends such as reading the daily newspapers. As William Renfro and James L. Morrison suggest, "modern scanning includes attention to economic developments, technological innovations, social change, and legislative and regulatory developments."[12] In most issues management programs, the second step setting priorities, is determined by the probability of the issue surfacing and its probable impact. Time frame is usually also considered to be important. Issue analysis procedures vary widely from organization to organization. Some of these procedures are quantitative; others qualitatively assess the corporate risk/oppor-

tunity exposure equation. The comprehensiveness of the analysis process differs widely and depends on the organization and the time frame within which it is operating. Determining strategy is a step in the process that has particular relevance to the total corporate public relations effort; it also influences the public affairs role through the strategems it devises to influence legislation. Implementing the strategy is primarily and public relations and public affairs function, as is evaluation. The implementation stage closely approximates the traditional public relations role: how to fulfill the necessary organizational goals through communication.

If the public relations curriculum is to serve the needs of those students wishing to develop and apply their skills within the corporate decision-making framework, advanced courses should explore the interfaces between traditional public relations and issues management. Further, students wishing a career in issues management should be carefully advised on curriculum. Relevant courses would include statistics, rhetorical theory, public policy, business policy/strategy, and advanced advertising and public relations writing courses. A course in speech writing would also be helpful.

Conclusion

As I suggested at the beginning of this paper, the task of choosing topics to include in a introductory public relations course is often overwhelming because of the large number of

relevant topics and the limited amount of course time available. Further, I have argued, one way out of the morass is to treat public relations in the basic course as strategic communication. That perspective is relevant to the real world and gives credibility to the specific public relations options and skills students should learn. Finally, I have suggested that advocacy and issues management are two areas in which public relations skills are demanded by both public and private sector organizations. By including the skills essential for advocacy in the basic course, and by advising our students on courses both within our own curriculum and external to it that relate to advocacy and to issues management, we may better prepare public relations professionals for major decision-making roles within the organization.

Footnotes

1 See, for example, Scott M. Cutlip and Allen H. Center, Effective Public Relations, 5th rev. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982; Doug Newsom and Alan Scott, This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981).

2 See Frank M. Corrado, Media for Managers (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), pp. 1-4.

3 See Jack Hilton and Mary Knoblauch, On Television: A Survival Guide for Media Interviews (New York: AMACOM, 1980).

4 Artie Adams Thrash, Annette N. Shelby, and Jerry L. Tarver, Communication in Business and the Professions: Speaking Up Successfully (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), pp. 153-157.

5 The doctrine, though under attack, is particularly relevant to advocacy advertising.

6 Thrash, Shelby and Tarver, Speaking Up Successfully, pp. 153-54.

7 Ibid, pp. 154-157.

8 There are clear exceptions, however. See George A. Douglas, Writing for Public Relations (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Pub. Co., 1980.

9 Jon Johnson, "Issues Management--What are the Issues?" siness Quarterly. (Fall, 1983), p. 22.

10 See John E. Fleming, "Linking Public Affairs with Corporate Planning," California Management Review, (Winter, 1980), p. 35.

11 Cited in Raymond P. Ewing, "Issues, Issues," Public Relations Journal, (June, 1980), p. 14.

12 William L. Renfro and James L. Morrison, "The Scanning Process: Getting Started," in James L. Morrison, William L. Renfro, and W.J. Boucher, (eds.), Applying Methods and Techniques of Futures Research: New Directions for Institutional Research, No. 39. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983), p. 6.